



Carolyn Marie Rodgers

“

*I've had tangled feelings lately
About ev'rything
Bout writing poetry, and otha forms
Bout talkin and dreamin with a
Special man (who says he needs me)
Uh huh
And my mouth has been open
Most of the time but
I ain't been saying nothin but
Thinking about ev'rything
And the partial pain has been
How do I put my self on paper
The way I want to be or am and be
Not like any one else in this
Black world but me*

— Breakthrough

”



Quick Facts

- * Born in 1945
- * African-American poet and short story writer
- * Author of *how I got ovah* (1975)

Biography

Carolyn Marie Rodgers was born in Chicago, Illinois, on December 14, 1945. She attended the University of Illinois in 1960, but transferred to Chicago's Roosevelt University in 1961 and received a BA in 1965. She began writing as a college freshman as a means to contend with the pressures of academic life. In 1980, she completed her BA and also earned a master's degree in English from the University of Chicago.

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Carolyn Marie Rodgers

Biography continued

Her association with various Chicago writers led her to a career as a poet. She achieved a national reputation as a writer whose works largely relate to her intrinsic concern with feminist issues. One issue in particular is her concern for black women in a society that changes so rapidly. Poems included in *Paper Soul* (1968) and *Songs of a Blackbird* (1969) are her earliest works that hold a strong thematic connection to the ideologies of Black revolutionary thought. Her works also include comments on the roles of women, female identity, and the relationships between mother and daughter. Two different volumes of her poetry, *The Heart As Ever Green* (1978) and *How I got ovah* (1975) also shed light on these and other feminist issues. These two volumes mark her emergence as one of the most powerful voices in contemporary poetry as well as one of the most effective black women poets writing today.

Rodgers states that she met one of her mentors, Hoyt Fuller, when she worked as a social worker at the YMCA (1963-1966). Now deceased, she cites him as being her “good literary father figure.” She said that he encouraged her as a writer and was an impetus for her first volume of poems entitled *Paper Soul*. She viewed him in such high regard that she asked him to write the introduction to her first volume of poetry. Fuller commented, “Rodgers’ perspective, both sharp and sweeping, encompasses the broad regions of what is and also the clear image of what might be. . .” In *Paper Soul*, the themes of identity, religion, revolution, and a woman’s need for love are portrayed. One of the poems from *Paper Soul*, “Now Ain’t That Love,” addresses the issue of the poet’s concern for her own identity molded by a lover.

Following the publication and success of *Paper Soul*, Rodgers was awarded the first Conrad Kent Rivers Memorial Fund Award (1968). She then began to write *Songs of a Blackbird*, which includes poems that address themes such as survival, street life, conflicting mother-daughter relationships, and love. These poems reveal her concern for the “black woman poet.” One of the poems, “Breakthrough,” illustrates how being black, female, and a poet is difficult, not just in contemporary poetry, but also in society as well. The poem also discusses how complicated it is to define oneself. She wrestles with identity construction through her writing of relationships between black men and women, where she shows a great concern for the ability of the woman to define herself in these relationships. After the publication of *Songs of a Blackbird*, Rodgers received the Poet Laureate Award from the Society of Midland Authors in 1970. Rodgers also received an award from the National Endowment of the Arts. As Bettye Parker-Smith has concluded in light of Carolyn Rodgers’ achievements, “Certainly, there never was a gap between the world of Rodgers’ vision which she glorifies and the authentic Black community.”



Carolyn Marie Rodgers

Biography continued

Carolyn Rodgers exhibits a clarity of expression and a respect for well-crafted language in her next book, *how I got ovah: New and Selected Poems* (1975). The poems in this collection are mainly autobiographical, and they “reveal Rodgers’ transformation from a militant Black woman to a woman intensely concerned with God, traditional values, and her private self.” Her messages often explore social conflict, yet they usually conclude with a sense of peace, hope, and a desire to search for life’s real treasure - inner beauty.

Rodgers’ messages and concerns all seem to come together in her poems involving her mother. In poems such as “for muh’ dear,” “It Must Be Deep,” “It is Deep,” and “Jesus Was Crucified,” she brings to life the generational conflict between a militant daughter with “wild free knotty and nappy/hair” and a “religious-negro” mother. Still, she is able to record the daughter’s growing appreciation for her mother and her way of living and surviving as well.

Rodgers’ most recent volume of poetry, *The Heart As Ever Green* (1978), incorporates themes of human dignity, feminism, love, black consciousness, and Christianity. The overlying theme is expressed metaphorically by the title poem “The Black Heart As Ever Green.” While Rodgers expresses the concern for truth, knowledge, and conflicts in life, she insists in poems such as, “Earth Is Not the World, Nor All Its Beauty,” that creation, becoming, renewal, and growth are not only potentialities, but accessible realities. She asserts that one should look at the larger picture of the world and nature and then read its truths. Rodgers relies upon images and metaphor, often drawn from the natural world, in order to paint her ideas. She uses, for example, the spring flowering, yellow forsythia bush as a metaphor for the process of annual renewal and for the sudden, bright appearance of hope and positive creation. This subtle poem shows the distance Rodgers has traveled since the publication of her first works.



Carolyn Marie Rodgers

Biography continued

In addition to poetry, Rodgers has also published short stories. “Blackbird in a Cage” (1967), is about a little girl trapped both in a bad neighborhood and by her mother’s dictates. To the little girl, not only was the neighborhood a cage, but her mother’s oppression as well. Other short stories include “A Statistic, Trying to Make It Home” (1969) and “One Time” (1975). In her short stories, as in her poetry, the dominating theme is survival, though she interweaves the idea of adaptability and conveys the concomitant message of life’s ever-changing avenues for black people whom she sees as her special audience. Rodgers says that her writing “is for whoever wants to read it . . . one poem doesn’t do that. But I try to put as many as I can in a book. A poem for somebody young, religious people, the church people. Just people. Specifically, Black people, I would like for them to like me.”

During her career as a writer, she has taught at the following institutions: Columbia College (1968-1969); University of Washington (Summer 1970); Malcolm X Community College (1972); Albany State College (1972); and Indiana University (Summer 1973). She has also held a position as a book critic for the *Chicago Daily News*, as well as a position as a columnist for the *Milwaukee Courier*. In December 1967, along with Haki R. Madhubuti, Johari Amini, and Roschell Rich, Rodgers helped found Third World Press, an outlet for African-American literature. Carolyn M. Rodgers is also a member of the Organization of Black American Culture, a group that promotes a citywide impact on cultural activity in the arts. Throughout the years she has filled many different positions, pursued many interests, and has been sustained by her poetry, music, and her contributions to the black community.



Carolyn Marie Rodgers

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